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According to Alamo. A Song.**

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Psalm 46
To the choirmaster. A Psalm of the Korahites.
According to Alamothe. A Song.

Introduction to Psalm 46

The heading is a note to the Choirmaster of the Temple. It identifies the Psalm as a song that originated in a group of Temple singers known as the Korahites, who composed also Psalms 42-49, 84, 85, and 87. *Alamothe* literally means “young women” or perhaps “the voices of young women,” i.e., high-pitched voices. It may be the name of a particular tune which was to be used for this Psalm. The word is found also in 1 Chronicles 15:20.

This Psalm may be divided into three stanzas. Its theme is sounded in verse 1: God is our refuge and strength, a completely accessible Helper in all time of trouble. That theme is then reinforced with the refrain that occurs at the end of stanza 2 (verse 7), and again at the end of stanza 3 (verse 11). As the refrain it is so appropriate, I could not resist placing it also after verse 3 at the end of stanza 1. Some scholars have taken the view that this refrain originally followed verse 3, but was inadvertently omitted by a scribe copying the Psalm. The refrain expresses the confidence that the LORD of hosts is with us; and such confidence and trust has as its corollary that we need not fear. Faith in God drives out fear during times of disaster; confidence in God brings courage even when nature and historical events turn against us.

STANZA 1

Vv. 1-3

- ¹ **God is our refuge and** (the source of our) **strength,**
 a very present (completely accessible) **help in trouble.**
² **Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be shaken,**
 though the mountains plunge into the depths of the sea;
³ **though its waters roar and foam,**
 though the mountains tremble with its tumult. **Selah**

(The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.)

This language is borrowed from experience of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, from floods and famine. We need not think very hard to recall times of natural disasters which will make us sympathetic to the language of these verses. When we can no longer depend upon the stability of the earth itself, we have cause for deep dread. When we experience deep dread, is there any way of finding relief or solace or salvation? The Psalmist may well have been employing these images for thinking the unthinkable, namely, that this world itself may indeed come to an end. Certainly Christian believers will be thinking in such terms.

The God who is our refuge and strength, who is so accessible when we need His help, is here identified as the LORD, Yahweh, the gracious God. He is also the all-powerful divine warrior who leads the heavenly hosts against all enemies, whether these be natural disasters enumerated in verses 2-3; or whether the enemies be the hostile armies suggested by verse 6.

The enemies are anything and everything that would call into question God's sole authority over the earth, for as Psalm 24:1-2 assert, the earth is the LORD's, because it is He who as Creator has founded it upon the seas. And it is He who is with us as Immanuel in our times of deep dread! Moreover, our refuge is the God of Jacob. To get some of the flavor of the importance of knowing the God of Jacob, read Genesis 28:10-17, where Jacob has his vision at Bethel. Read also Genesis 32:24-32, where Jacob is renamed Israel at Peniel.

The meaning of term "Selah" is unknown. When the Jews in Alexandria, Egypt, translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek in about 200 BC, a version of the Old Testament which we know as the Septuagint, they translated this word as "musical pause." It is the best translation we can offer.

STANZA 2

Vv. 4-7

**⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.**

**⁵ God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;
God will help her when the morning dawns.**

**⁶ The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.**

**⁷ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.**

Selah

Throughout the Bible there is in the background an image of the dwelling place of God from which the life-giving waters flow in a stream out to the earth. You might want to note Genesis 2:10, which speaks of a river which both waters Eden itself and also flows out to the earth. And at the end of the Bible, the Revelation to St. John, 22:1-2 speaks of a river originating at the throne of God and flowing out to the heavenly city. (You might want to compare also Ezekiel 47:1-14 and Joel 3:18 for other allusions to this vision.) Here the reference to the City of God points to a center of stability when all else on the earth is shaking and tottering. The reason is that this City of God is the place where the Most High dwells.

Where is that City of God, that holy habitation of the Most High? The Psalmist in all probability thinks it to be Zion, that is, Jerusalem. (You might want to look at Psalm 48:1-2, another Korahite Psalm, in which that identification is made explicitly.) God is in the midst of her, that is, in His Temple. The city of Jerusalem shall not be moved, that is, she shall not be defeated and destroyed. Why? Because God shall help her in the morning after the darkness has passed. And how shall He help the city of Jerusalem? By uttering His voice, and at the sound of His voice the earth with all its opposition to the LORD shall simply melt away.

Significantly, however, the Psalm never says that Zion is our refuge; it is always God who is the refuge. While the City of God was for a while lodged in Jerusalem, the time came when Jerusalem was sacked and the City of God was located elsewhere. Psalm 74 records the pain and anguish which the Israelites experienced when Mt. Zion lay in ruins. In the New Testament it becomes clear that the LORD dwells not in a building or in a fixed location, but rather in the body of Jesus. The Word of God became incarnate, and in Jesus, God dwells among us. The City of God is the Jerusalem above (Galatians 4:26), and only at the End will that New Jerusalem come down from heaven from God (Revelation 21:2). Between those two times, God in Christ is there for us where he has promised to be, namely, in his word of promise and in the sacraments.

STANZA 3

Vv. 8-11

- ⁸ Come, behold the works of the LORD;
how he has wrought desolation in the earth.**
- ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.**

The works of the LORD are strange and terrifying. Verse 8 looks back to verse 6b, when the voice of the LORD melts all earth's opposition. The desolation and ruin of war are in some deep and mysterious sense His doing. And we are invited to recognize the futility of war. God will have war no more; He will make warfare cease, and He will destroy all the weapons of war.

- ¹⁰ “Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.”**

- ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.**

Selah

The reason that God wipes out armies and destroys their weapons is so that the earth finally learns to be still and recognize Him as God. He alone is Ruler and worthy of all honor. He alone may rightfully be acknowledged as Sovereign.

Verse 10a is easily transplanted from its context into a motto for our frenzied, stress-filled life. **Be still and know that I am God.** Sit back, relax, be still. The struggle for power or recognition or control is futile. There is only one God; He is Yahweh, the God of Jacob at Bethel and Peniel. He is in charge, and He will be duly exalted. Our praise anticipates that Day.

The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 46:

Lord God, our refuge and strength, when the restless powers of this world and the waters of hell rise up against your holy city, watch over it and keep it safe. By the river that flows from the throne of the Lamb, purify this new Jerusalem as your chosen dwelling, for you are with us, our stronghold now and forever. Amen.

As perhaps you are aware, this Psalm was the inspiration for Martin Luther when he composed what came to be known as the Battle Hymn of the Reformation, “A Mighty Fortress is our God.” Luther wrote a short introduction to Psalm 46, which reads as follows:

The 46th Psalm is a psalm of thanks, sung by the people of Israel because of the mighty deeds of God. He had protected and saved the city of Jerusalem, in which was his dwelling, against all the rage and the fury of all the kings and the nations and preserved their peace against all warfare and weapons. And, in the manner of the Scriptures, the Psalm calls the character of the city a “little spring of water,” that is, a little stream that shall not run dry, as opposed to the great rivers, seas, and oceans of the heathen – their great kingdoms, principalities, and domains – that shall dry up and disappear.

We on the other hand, sing this Psalm to praise God for being with us. He miraculously preserves his Word and Christendom against the gates of hell, against the rage of the devil, the rebellious spirits, the world, the flesh, sin, death. Our little spring of water also is a living fountain, while their puddles, pools, and ponds become foul, malodorous, and dry.

In his hymn Luther picks up the battle imagery of the Psalm, but looks behind the temporal powers and armies to the hidden, demonic dimensions of powerful opposition to God and His people. Because Luther is a Biblical theologian, not just an Old Testament scholar, God is incarnate in Christ Jesus, who is the Lord of hosts; the old evil foe is the devil, who has no equal upon the earth; and the Kingdom is not an earthly Israel, but an earthly Christendom. Our faith becomes evident when, in the face of the terrible devastation Satan can cause – loss of goods, fame, child, spouse --, we neither tremble nor fear any ill. Satan cannot win the day, because God himself fights for us and ours shall be the Kingdom.

The Prayer from the LBW for Reformation Day:

Almighty God, gracious Lord, pour out your Holy Spirit upon your faithful people. Keep them steadfast in your Word, protect and comfort them in all temptations, defend them against all their enemies, and bestow on the Church your saving peace; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Nugget

I have often asked myself why human beings have any rights at all. I always come to the conclusion that human rights, human freedoms, and human dignity have their deepest roots somewhere outside the perceptible world. These values are as powerful as they are because, under certain circumstances, people accept them without compulsion and are willing to die for them, and they make sense only in the perspective of the infinite and the eternal. I am deeply convinced that what we do, whether it be in harmony with our conscience, the ambassador of eternity, (emphasis mine, nice phrase: WEK) or in conflict with it, can only finally be assessed in a dimension that lies beyond that world we can see around us. If we did not sense this, or we did not subconsciously assume it, there are some things that we could never do.

Allow me to conclude my remarks on the state and its probable role in the future with the assertion that, while the state is a human creation, human beings are the creation of God.

Vaclav Havel, as quoted in *Context*, November 1, 1999

Walter E. Keller

October 31, 1999 – **Reformation Day**